

DVR Director's Message for January 2009

2009 Legislative Session

The current Legislative Session got off to a fast start for us. As you likely know, the State Legislature opened its 105-day session on Monday, January 12. On Wednesday morning, January 14, I presented an overview of DVR's services, outcomes and funding to the House Human Services Committee. The presentation went well and I have an invitation to follow up with one of the Representatives next week. On Wednesday, January 21 an overview of our base budget will be presented to the House Health and Human Services Appropriations Committee. These are just the beginning steps in a process that will likely take many twists and turns before adjournment and signature of the final budget by the Governor later this Spring.

At the Washington State Rehabilitation Council quarterly meeting last week here in Olympia, Lorie Christoferson and I discussed DVR's budget for the remainder of this state fiscal year and what we project for the upcoming biennium. The recently passed 2009 supplemental budget included a total general fund state reduction to DVR of \$4,141,000. Even with taking those deep cuts this year, we were able to fully match our current federal fiscal year grant (October 2008 - September 2009). By doing so, we were able to carry forward and will be able to use approximately \$20 million of unspent federal funds during this federal fiscal year. This will allow us to maintain our anticipated level of client services and approved staffing level.

The prospects look good for us. Because we began implementing cost-saving measures over the past two years, we are in a good position. We will continue to serve everyone who has an open case. We will continue to be able to serve without a delay all those who apply. We are not expecting to lay staff off or go back into an order of selection.

The key to our success remains the same. We are committed to making good, solid rehabilitation decisions and we will stretch our resources as far as we can. We will continue to look for ways to align and realign our resources to meet our business needs. We want to fully use our capacity and leverage community partnerships to increase the employment of individuals with significant disabilities.

Good News - DVR's Hiring Cap is Workable

In August 2008, the Governor instructed state agencies to take a series of administrative actions to help reduce costs. The administrative actions included a hiring freeze and restrictions on travel, equipment purchases and personal services contracts. Like most other agencies and programs, our ability to deliver timely services was seriously impacted by the hiring freeze.

I am very pleased to share the good news that we now have a **hiring cap** rather than the hiring freeze. The hiring cap is the level of staffing that we need to manage within. Set at an FTE level of 344.4 this year and 341.4 for the 2009-11 biennium, the hiring cap for DVR is very workable. We are currently utilizing 310 FTE and now have the ability to fill critical vacancies. Working within our hiring cap level, we will be able to address our staffing needs.

We have developed a hiring plan to help guide our efforts over the next few months. The guiding principles in our plan focus on our commitment to:

- Attain a level of capacity that achieves, maintains and sustains efficient and effective service delivery
- Seek opportunities to increase our diversity hiring
- Look for opportunities to realign resources to meet our changing business needs
- Build on the increases in our performance achieved in 2008 - measured in increases in applications, eligibilities, plans, successful rehabilitations and rehabilitation rate
- Stay below the 2009-11 Hiring Cap level (341.4 FTE)

We have begun to initiate recruitments to fill key vacancies in the field. I'm delighted that we'll be able to bring on staff and better meet our service delivery needs. The past few months have been very difficult for most offices as you've dealt with vacancies and the uncertainties of the budget situation. Please accept my thanks for your hard work, your dedication and for sustaining a positive work environment. I'd appreciate your assistance in telling friends, colleagues and partners about our openings as they are posted.

National News - Economic Stimulus Package Includes VR and IL

Late last week, we heard about the possibility of increased funding for both the public Vocational Rehabilitation program and Independent Living. The Council of State Administrators (CSAVR) shared that VR and IL have been included in the economic stimulus package being worked on by the new Congress. There are still many hurdles to clear but it's encouraging to know that we've made it this far. Advocates for the VR program intend to continue to make the case of why persons with disabilities who want to work need to be included in this economic stimulus package. The House and the Senate plan to take up the tax and spending packages in the coming weeks with the goal of sending President Obama a final bill for his signature by mid-February.

For DVR and other state VR programs, our inclusion in the economic stimulus package really sends a positive message about our role in increasing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities who want to work. For DVR, it would mean an additional \$4.2 million in federal funds beginning in October 2009 with another \$4.2 million in 2010. The federal funds would come without the usual state match requirement and a 2 year MOE (Maintenance Of Effort) waiver.

It is far too early to tell if this will all come together. We will keep you posted as we hear more. In spite of all the uncertainties we face, it's nice to focus on the possibilities!

Progress This Federal Fiscal Year

As we make our way through this second quarter of the federal fiscal year, we are meeting all of our federal performance indicators! Our rate of applications is steady, reflecting the positive work we're doing with community partners on appropriate referrals. We've developed 1,400 IPEs and assisted more than 725 individuals with significant disabilities to become successfully employed. Our rehabilitation rate continues to be above the federal standard and stays close to 60% statewide.

Business Leadership Network Update

The Thurston County Chamber of Commerce has taken the lead to develop a "Work for All" workforce initiative. They have received initial funding from the Pacific Mountain Workforce Development Council's Innovation Alliance grant. DVR is excited and pleased to be a partner in this effort. The goal is

to increase business awareness and interest in opportunities and resources for including workers with disabilities in their workforce. The plan is to increase educational resources and tools available to businesses to employ more individuals with disabilities. Through the Chambers of Commerce in our local five county region, successful employment outcomes will be recognized and celebrated. This new workforce initiative will be partnering with us and sponsoring our upcoming quarterly Say Hey Olympia networking events.

Closing Thoughts

With the start of the New Year, I want to share my sense of hope and optimism for our future. We provide an important public service and we are ready to help our customers succeed. Even during these difficult economic times, our customers are becoming employed and are contributing to their communities. We have high but attainable performance goals for this year. We continue to demonstrate that, together with our partners, we make a positive difference. What a great way to start the New Year! Thank you.

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